

Corrections.com Interview With Commissioner Donahue

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Commissioner Donahue

More than a decade ago, 10 year-old Zachary Snider was murdered by a convicted child molester that was living close to his Indiana home. Devastated by the brutal crime and mourning the loss of young Snider, state officials - and friends and family of the little boy - were determined to prevent it from happening again.

So in 1994, Indiana adopted Zachary's Law, which requires sex offenders within the state to register with local law enforcement officials and make their whereabouts known for 10 years after their release. By calling for a state-wide sex offender registry, officials and authorities hoped that citizens of Indiana would feel safer. But over the years, that registry system has become clunky and ineffective.

Although the registry provided necessary information, no one entity took charge to develop a comprehensive system. Across the state, three separate registries had been created which caused a discrepancy in the information available - and the system wasn't user friendly. In an effort to offer the most up-to-date information about the roughly 7,500 sex offenders living in the state, Indiana officials recently joined forces to revamp the registry system and make it much more accessible.

"We realized that [our old registries] weren't sufficient - we weren't providing accurate, manageable information to our citizens", says Indiana Department of Corrections Commissioner J. David Donahue. "Theoretically, you had to go through all three registries in the hopes that you could find the information that you needed. It just wasn't working. We had to address that - and we have, with this new system."

Indiana's new sex offender registry system merges the initial three systems to create a comprehensive database with a web interface that is simple to use.

"I'll be honest, I don't know the difference between gigahertz and megabytes," says Donahue. "But our

new system is comprehensive, accurate and user-friendly. It's going to put Indiana on the map - and I would not be surprised at all if other states used us as a model for revamping their own registries if needed."

Officials in Indiana are excited about the new registry, which launched on January 23rd. The state is now dedicated to updating the registry every 24-hours and offering the most comprehensive information possible in a single registry.

Merging Sex Offender Technologies

In order to revamp the sex offender registry, officials decided to use parts of the old systems that were effective and merge them into one - which was no easy task. The Indiana Sheriff's Association had developed one registry, the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute kept another, and the third registry was updated by the Indiana Department of Corrections. Each of the three registries had different information about the offenders, some with old photos and outdated addresses and one system had a mapping feature.

"Information sharing in law enforcement overall has historically been somewhat troubling," says Donahue. "Some jurisdictions had different information and there was a miscommunication -- but it's an evolution. We're evolving. Technology changes so fast in this country that some people were behind the eight ball. With this new system, that will no longer be the case."

Officials in Indiana initially struggled to find a technology company that could address their needs without breaking the budget. After investigating a few different technology companies, Appriss Incorporated was chosen for its easy-to-use system, budget-friendly rates, and database that can expand easily.

"We've had a great time combining forces with Appriss to create this system," says Donahue. "The other thing that's nice about this is that as technology changes, we can continue to make adjustments to the system without having to readjust the database. I know that [our new system] has a phenomenal shelf-life. I'd love to think there's no need for growth in this business - I'd love to think that we could rehabilitate and change people," Donahue says. "But if we need to add new offenders, this system has a great capacity"

New Features Enhance Public Awareness

In addition to database changes, officials also wanted to be able to adjust to new technologies. Donahue says it was crucial to include mapping features in the new registry, borrowing from one of the three original systems. But during the construction of the new system, Donahue said officials also kept simplicity in mind.

"When you log onto the site, it's a fill-in-the-blank portal," Donahue explains. "You just identify your address, and the system will show you a map of the registered sex offenders that live within a two-mile

radius, and then you can click out to a 20 mile or 50 mile radius to see a larger or smaller area. It's not difficult - it's quite easy to use and it gives you the most comprehensive information."

The new registry will also boast a feature which alerts citizens about sex offenders that move into or out of an area via email. According to Donahue, this feature not only ensures the awareness and knowledge of the community, but also enforces a sense of accountability for registered sex offenders. And in order to ensure that accountability, the Indiana Department of Corrections also revamped its sex offender policies.

"We're really focused on informing the community about sex offenders - and making sure that these offenders cannot slip through the cracks," Donahue says. "Before this registry, sex offenders that came out of the IDOC had seven days to register in the community. But now, we're going to pre-register every sex offender before they leave the IDOC. There will be no sex offender that leaves our system that can even possibly register - there is no way for them to get around the laws on our books that requires them to register. We really want to drill down on accountability for these registries. We want public safety to really be enhanced."

With the shift of focus to public safety and accountability, Donahue believes the new registry addresses issues that matter to all members of the community. And in order to offer the widest range of information possible, the new registry will also be directly linked to the nation-wide database of sex offenders. With this new information available at the fingertips of every citizen, Donahue is confident that Indiana is making great progress towards public awareness.

"Across the board, it's our commitment to public safety," Donahue says. "Nobody wants to see somebody in the community who wants to know about sex offenders - no one wants to withhold that information. We want to keep kids safe, we want to make our communities a great place to live; we want folks to feel great about our public parks and schools. We want to make sure that people who participate in this type of behavior cannot prey on future victims. We're just committed to this."

Resources:

- Indiana Sex Offender Registry: www.indianasheriffs.org
- National Sex Offender Registry: <http://www.nsopr.gov/>
- Appriss Technology: www.appriss.com

About the Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.